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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF P. M. FRIESEN'S HISTORY

FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN SELF-UNDERSTANDING

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Introduction

The publication of The History of the Mennonite Brethren Church by John A. Toews in 1975 provided the occasion for a symposium to review the historical pilgrimage of the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood and to pose questions about current Mennonite Brethren identity.¹ Concerns about Mennonite Brethren identity during recent years have not been limited to formal occasions like the symposium. Articles on Mennonite history, theology and identity have appeared repeatedly over the past several years in conference periodicals.² These efforts reflect a search by the present generation of the Mennonite Brethren leaders to recover and refocus the character and mission of the church. The need to understand the past in order to understand the present and find direction for the future is a normal part of man's quest for continuity and vision. "We are forever indebted to the past, it is the source of our very identity, observed in the present moment which changes as we live it, the past is all we know. Therein lies the secret use of history. We are not seeking to put history under a microscope, to cut it into slices for critical examination. What we do want is to apply the experiences of the past to events today. A spokesman from another age may illuminate our problem and help us to plot our future course."³ The message of the scripture which God addresses to the human race of many generations is clothed in the form of historical events that illuminate the unchangeables of God's character, relationship and purpose for each generation.

The republication of P. M. Friesen's book The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910) in translation from the German gives us a new opportunity to examine our present self-understanding in the light of our past. The contributions of the P. M. Friesen work for Mennonite Brethren self-understanding and mission can no longer remain unnoticed. The full record of his contribution to the life and faith of the Mennonite Brethren cannot be covered in the limited space assigned to this writing. Only a few selected areas of significance can be considered.

The commitment of P. M. Friesen to historical research and documentation and his painstaking concern for objectivity as an author adds to the value of the work. He presents a Mennonite Brethren history in the context of the broader Anabaptist and Mennonite pilgrimage, thus providing for us a proper perspective for our own self-understanding.⁴

The P. M. Friesen Work and the Historical

Identity of the Mennonite Brethren

A major section of the book The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)⁵ is devoted to the birth and development of the movement which became known as the Mennonite Brethren Church. The assignment to write the book came from the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren on the occasion of their 25th anniversary. It is important to note that only 373 pages in a book of more than 1,000 pages address the original assignment. The story of the mid-19th century events in Mennonite history is contextualized in the broader Anabaptist movement. The roots of the Mennonite Brethren are traced to the 16th century radical reformation. Friesen narrates this history from diverse historical sources--diaries from Mennonite martyrs, studies of non-Mennonite scholars (e.g., Freiheim, Reisweitz, Waldzeck), as well as Mennonite writers.⁶ The works of Menno Simons are given a central place in the introduction to the founding document of the Mennonite Brethren Church.⁷ The critical chapters on the history of the Mennonite congregations in Holland and

Prussia relates the Mennonites in Russia to their forebearers in Western Europe.⁸ The history of the Mennonite Church in Russia from 1789 to 1910 pictures the historical setting of the mother church which gave birth to the Mennonite Brethren.⁹ These chapters on Mennonite history indicate clearly the deep struggle for spiritual renewal that occurred in the decades preceding 1860.¹⁰ A once vibrant evangelical witness had given way to institutional traditionalism concerned mainly with self-perpetuation incapsuled in cultural exclusiveness and economic affluence.

The "Kleine Gemeinde" under the leadership of Klaas Reimer (1812-1819) created some vibration in the ecclesiastical power structure in Reimer's disposition. According to Friesen, he was devoid of the joyous knowledge of God's grace and his confessional stance in educational and cultural matters was very narrow.¹¹ Nevertheless, Friesen speaks of the "Kleine Gemeinde" as "a messenger calling the Molotschna Mennonites to repentance, but it would appear to us because it was too narrow-minded, too frightened, too isolationist and opposed to education it never made a profound impact."¹²

Serious convulsions within the Mennonite Church continued as a result of tensions between conservates and progressive minded leaders. The relation of Mennonite groups to the Russian Bible Society, differences regarding education, and reaction to religious civil authority plagued the Mennonite Church during the first half of the 19th century.¹³ The spiritual conditions of the large Mennonite Church during that period must be recognized¹⁴ to understand the influence of pietism which appeared as a star of hope for many longing hearts within a spiritually drifting Anabaptist-mennonite community.

The spiritual awakening which preceeded 1860 in opposition to ecclesiastical and civilian authoritarianism increasingly withdrew from the institutional church to find liberty and nurture within a true believing church.

The beginning of the Mennonite Brethren Church was one of the strongest expressions of this trend. The persecutions that followed from leaders of the

established Mennonite Church and the continued effort to defranchise the new formed Mennonite Brethren fellowship as part of the Mennonite community created tensions which left their mark on Mennonite Brethren identity. The commitment of the Mennonite Brethren to the principles of faith and life as understood by Menno Simons and the larger Anabaptist community never came into question. The statement of the Document of Secession, "We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures,"¹⁵ makes this clear. The identity question thus was never one of basic theological commitment but rather one of relationship within the broader Mennonite community because of non-acceptance. The expulsion of the Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite community and the possible banishment to Siberia in the 1860s was prevented by Russian authorities in response to the intercessory influences of Elder Johann Harder, Ohrloff.¹⁶ Legal recognition of the Mennonite Brethren as a Mennonite Church fellowship was given by the Russian government in 1862 over the protest of the majority of the Mennonite ecclesiastical leadership.¹⁷ The basic stance of non-acceptance prevailed for the first half century of the Mennonite Brethren Church's history. It was expressed clearly again in Schoenweise on March 7, 1914. A larger Mennonite delegation attempted to exclude the Mennonite Brethren from the official exemption from military service because of the missionary witness of the Mennonite Brethren, derisively called propaganda efforts (propagandistische Bestrebungen--religious propaganda). The need for the Mennonite Brethren to clarify its position as a Mennonite fellowship before the civil government in response to the expressed concern about their evangelistic and missionary activity on the part of the mother church after 54 years of history was a very painful chapter for them.¹⁸ The rejection by the majority of the mother church elders to recognize the Mennonite Brethren as a member in the Mennonite community of faith was difficult for the Mennonite Brethren to accept and was a cause for distance on the part of some Mennonite Brethren towards the broader Mennonite community.¹⁹

The sufferings and privations that followed the first World War (1914-1917) and the October Revolution of 1917 served as an effective means to purify the Mennonite fellowship in Russia. It created a mutual identification in historical relationships but also in spiritual fellowship. The chapters of spiritual identification of the two bodies which developed in the heat of much tribulation, sorrow and death during the years 1918 through 1928 brought healing from the past and a new dimension of spiritual relationship, mutual recognition and appreciation to the Mennonite community in Russia.

The tensions described above also carried over to the United States and Canada after the immigration of the 1870s. In their evangelistic zeal the Mennonite Brethren did not limit themselves to people outside of the Mennonite community but also considered the Mennonite Church as a field for their evangelism and missions. The tension concerning evangelistic zeal created by the evangelistic zeal by Mennonite Brethren have also been a point of tension periodically in the mutual relationship of the world-wide efforts of MCC in which Mennonite Brethren very frequently have insisted that the ministry of mercy must be accompanied by the message of salvation which again by other Mennonite groups did not find a general acceptance but were limited to only personal witness and an occasional effort initiated by some of the workers of Mennonite Central Committee.

On the other side of the ledger we must also recognize that the missionary and evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren, and their emphasis on salvation as a personal experience--an heritage which has come to the Mennonites from the pietistic movement in Europe--developed an attitude towards other Mennonites which can best be described as a "holier than thou" syndrome. The status of a minority group within the larger community, zeal for missions and evangelism, emphasis on personal salvation and sanctification, stricter church discipline in the exclusion of members that would not walk according to the statutes of the scriptures as understood by the Mennonite Brethren, their rejection of recognizing the other forms

of baptism practiced by other Mennonite groups even though they were baptisms on the basis of personal redemptive experiences in contrast to the mere demand for catechism in earlier days, all contributed to the tension that continued between the Mennonite Brethren and the other Mennonites in Russia as well as in America. The effects of these tensions have not been fully erased up to this day.

— Is still present in Russian scene today? — Baptism in Russia —

P. M. Friesen and Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding

in Faith and Practice

The statement in the document of secession "We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures"²⁰ in Friesen's understanding implies that the causes of separation of the Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite body was basically not theological but one of life and practice. The tension between the dogma of a confessional statement of belief and the expression of such dogma in actual life appears as the cause for the separation. The major areas of these tensions appear to be the following.

Redemptive Faith

Menno's teaching regarding redemptive faith²¹ according to Friesen is focal.

The secessionists claimed that the Mennonite Church of the early and middle 19th century had departed from Menno's understanding of faith which in part is expressed as follows:

All who have received faith from God have received a tree laden with a variety of good and precious fruits. The true and genuine faith acceptable in God's sight cannot remain idle, it must bring fruit and manifest itself in character. It is constantly active in love; voluntary enters righteousness; subdues flesh and blood by crucifying the lusts and the desires; finds joy in the cross of Christ; renews and gives birth to newness of life; gives life; is candid and peaceable in Christ. Behold, such a faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8), which according to the scriptures, the righteous shall live as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rachel and all pious saints have done. Every good tree brings forth fruit according to its time (Matt. 7:17). And every tree which does not bear good fruit though it has many leaves must be condemned and consumed by fire.²²

*How valid as
an observation
by an historian*

Friesen adds: "It is apparent that Menno was equally distanced from the Roman Catholic position of works righteousness as he was from frivolous Protestant position of salvation through faith alone without a sanctified life."²³ The central concern of the Mennonite Brethren before and after the withdrawal in 1860, according to Friesen, was conversion to God through repentance and faith in the reconciling grace in Jesus Christ and a life sanctified according to the rules of the gospel through the gift of the grace of the Spirit of God.²⁴ For the purpose of clarity we quote from paragraph E of the Secession document dealing with this particular concern:

We confess a baptism on faith as a seal of faith: not on a memorized faith as is the practice, but on a genuine loving faith defected by the spirit of God. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). And he that hath not the spirit of God, is none of his (Rom. 8:9). And again our Savior says to Nicodemus (John 3:3) "Accept a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Baptism is not a new birth as some of the unconverted maintain, but serves as a sign for the baptismal candidate, that he is really born again.

f) Regarding holy communion we confess that it serves to strengthen the faith of true believers, for they are reminded of their mighty salvation through the death of the Lord Jesus. Yes it is a sign that they stand the very intimate union with Christ, their Savior (I Cor. 10:16). Furthermore, it serves as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of the believer (vs.17), and not as a sign of the fellowship of believers and unbelievers with one another, as it is presently practiced. This is likewise stated in Menno's Foundations of Christian Doctrine, Vol. 1, pages 115-121. Page 121 reads: If someone errs in doctrine and faith and walks in the flesh, he can in no way be permitted to fellowship with the God-fearing and repentant. . . . In first Corinthians 15:11 the apostle Paul states: If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator or coveteous, or an adulter, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioneer; with such an one we are not even to eat. How much less partake of the Holy Communion with him? Unfortunately, there are many coveteous, drunkards and blasphemers with whom one shares the Lord's supper, for one only those are drunkards who are almost continually under the influence of liquer, but all those who occasionally gorge themselves with food and drink at markets and taverns. I Cor. 10:20-21 says: That the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils. Likewise also those, who walk in the flesh cannot glorify God in the communion because they do not know him, but as usual they serve the devil herewith for no man can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). Now the apostles did not want the believers to have fellowship with the devil and the idolators who serve the devil and thus become one body (I Cor. 10:17).

From the above it is clear that the Secessionists could not accept a mere profession of faith without the evidences of a spiritual transformation in the new

birth. The years of persecution endured by the Mennonite Brethren by the hand of their mother church following January 1860 provided the proving grounds where their faith was tested.²⁶

The reaction of the Mennonite Brethren to the memorization of the catechism--as the only condition for baptism--"We confess a baptism of faith as a seal of faith: not as a memorized faith as it is practiced"²⁷--resulted in the adoption of an examination process for baptism candidates in which the corporate body of a congregation participated. The candidate was required to relate his personal experience of a new birth, establish the criteria of change in character and relationship which had taken place and take a covenant to live a life consistant with the character of a new creature in Christ. In addition to the personal testimony of the candidate testimonies from members of his family, from friends, co-workers in places of employment, and professional associates were required. Such testimonies were not limited to people of the church community but also included those who may not even profess to be Christians; however had close associations with the candidate. The issue, is the candidate "a new creature in Christ" was the crucial concern. Profession and life were to be proven consistent.

The emphasis on faith and salvation as a provision to become the recipient of the benefits of Christ's redemption with limited or no emphasis on the results of being a new creature, to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) presents a major point of reorientation for Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite community at large. The responsibility for the life that followed the profession of salvation became a very crucial issue in the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren to the Menninote Church and also became a focal point in the question of the church's responsibility for the walk of the members of the church. The practice of church discipline followed as a natural result of this responsibility.

Mennonites generally - what was their assessment of "orthodox" condition of members generally?

Community Discipline

The understanding that redemption finds expression in a new life-style placed responsibility on the corporate community to guard the testimony of the church and discipline those whose walk according to their understanding did not conform to the standards of scripture. The Secessionists document expresses this responsibility rather clearly:

Regarding the ban we confess that all carnal and reprobate sinners must be banned from the fellowship of believers as Paul states in II Thess. 3:14-15. In the event that someone falls into carnal sin (God save us from it), and the Spirit of Christ, who alone can work through repentance, convicts him of his sin, so that he confesses and repents; in that case, the church has no authority to ban such a repentant sinner, because the forgiveness of sin is not obtained in or through the ban, but by the merit of Jesus Christ. This was also Menno's conviction, as recorded in Vol. 3, pages 334 and 335. However, an unrepentant sinner may not be accepted into the fellowship of believers until he be genuinely converted to Christ.²⁸

Johann Harder, elder of the Mennonite Church in Ohrloff, in his writing to the Molotschna Mennonite area administrative office, dated March 29, 1860, pleads for the right of the Mennonite Brethren to exist as a separate fellowship in the larger Mennonite community and underlines their commitment to a responsible discipline of its members in contrast to the lack of such exercise within the Mennonite Church of which he was a part.²⁹

Dobbert, a Lutheran pastor from Prischib, responds to the division among the Mennonites in a writing dated July 1864, points to the justification of the cause for the Mennonite Brethren. Their plea, he said, is a call for discipline within the church which is lacking in their mother church. "Klassen" he says. "as was the case within his followers, did not enter the battle with carnal weapons. He had openly announced and lamented the collapse of church discipline--the Achilles heel of the church--insisting that it be practiced again."³⁰ Friesen contends that the felt need for a consistency of life as a testimony of true salvation felt by many attracted more and more participants of likeminded people from the congregations of the mother church to associate themselves with the newly established Mennonite Brethren fellowship.³¹ The emphasis on consistency of character and being to

conform to the witness of a redeemed life must be recognized as a major quality for an effective evangelism and growth in the first quarter century following 1860. Here the parallel of Acts 2:47 may be applied where it says: "They were praising God and having favor with all the people and the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

The commitment to the principle of a disciplined church in the early history of the Mennonite Brethren movement (1862-64) became the redeeming factor in a time of great crisis known as the phenomena of the exuberant movement (Die Froehliche Richtung). Historically this phenomena must be viewed as an extreme over-emphasis on the certainty and the joy of salvation in contrast to the general absence of such assurance in the formal, traditional, institutionalism of the Russian Mennonite Church of the 19th century. The young M.B. church would have faltered had it not been for the corporate responsibility of discipline under the leadership of Johann Classen, an action known as the June Reform.³² Though the exercise of discipline in the practice of the Mennonite Brethren on occasions became reactionary and later legalistic, the principle still remained a major dynamic in the life and character of the movement.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in the Ordinance of Baptism and the Fellowship of All True Believers

Friesen, as a historian, does not fail to provide a broad background related to the issue of the mode of baptism. The record of the Anabaptist movement since the 16th century records variations with respect to the mode; all however agree on adult baptism as a seal of faith in Jesus Christ. In his reference to Menno's position he quotes as follows:

The writings of Menno Simons in the German version that we possess are not at all clear concerning the form of baptism. While his treatment of baptism is entitled "Von der Christlichen Taufe in dem Wasser" (concerning Christian baptism in water), he also uses the expression of "handful of water" as far as is historically known to date many apparently did not

practice immersion and were ever, like most Anabaptist of his time, was quite mutual, perhaps indifferent, in regard to the question, rigorous though it was in demanding a living faith before baptism.³³

The record that baptism by immersion was not a prerequisite with the Mennonite Brethren in the early days of the beginning is significant. The claim of Jakob P. Bekker that the understanding of baptism as an immersion came to the early brethren as a result of their studies and commitment to return to the biblical practices of baptism without influences from without, is open to question.³⁴ The documented review of the process given by Friesen, indicates that historical forces of relationships played a major part in the final adoption of immersion as the only recognized mode. In taking note of the tensions of an historical setting affecting the relationship of the mother church towards the new life movement in the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren, one cannot escape the impression that the emphasis of immersion as the exclusive biblical form carried with it an expression of a relational character rather than a purely theological. The restrictions to require immersion baptism as a condition for the participation in the Lord's Supper which followed³⁵ became an occasion of isolationism resulting in dogmatic defense of a form. Friesen's emphasis for the need to recognize pouring and sprinkling as an acceptable mode of baptism, no doubt reflects the concern of a large segment of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship after the storm of the initial years subsided and the Mennonite Brethren gradually related more freely to the larger Mennonite community.

The far-reaching implication of the position held by the Mennonite Brethren on the issue of baptism is well stated by Friesen in the following paragraph:

If we refuse communion fellowship in our association to a child of God because of our lack of understanding then we offend a member of Christ's body. If the Mennonite Brethren Church as a body cannot yet decide in favor of such fellowship at communion, one should permit it in love and kindness to those who wish to do it in private circles according to the program given in Waldheim in May of 1903. The duty of tolerant brotherly love towards those who demand open communion and kind indulgence of the "all too strict ones" on the part of the "liberated ones" must be no less categorically emphasized. We are absolutely free in respect to any difference in understanding of the brother and therefore we cannot understand how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's

commandment, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters. This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and therefore to coerce him.³⁶

The position of exclusiveness of the Mennonite Brethren in applying the baptism question also to the relationship of marriage has been an occasion of endless tensions. (Members of the Mennonite Brethren Church were forbidden to marry believers from other Mennonite groups who practiced other forms of baptism.)³⁷ The demand for rebaptism by immersion for non-Mennonite Brethren as a prerequisite to marry Mennonite Brethren members, reflects a degree of dogmatism of which the Mennonite Brethren have been guilty in too many areas. Here and in other questions of faith and practice we may well join Friesen in his confession when he states "the Mennonite Brethren Church could not grasp the fact--O we thick of head and narrow of heart--that not everyone else was convinced that we knew it all and had nothing worthwhile to learn from anyone else."³⁸

Friesen refers to the protective conservatism which took roots in the initial years of M.B. history as a time of the "mad years during the winters of 1861-62 and 64-65." He describes some of the leaders of that era as "these people never seem to harbor a thought about church history that were beyond the borders of the common Mennonite framework (although they talked of spreading their ideas throughout the world). Nor have they ever read a serious book on theology. But they did have warm blood and healthy nerves."³⁹

The influence of this conservatism in relationship to born-again believers from other evangelical fellowships, not practicing immersion baptism, is reflected even in the resolution of the Mennonite Brethren conference in 1963 concerning "Reception Into Fellowship of Non-Immersed Believers." The conditions of restrictions in this resolution limiting such members with regard to transfer to other fellowships within the brotherhood and disqualifying them from leadership requiring ordination was a compromise necessary to protect the unity of the brotherhood. Even these restrictions did not satisfy a large segment of the

conference delegation reflected from the 120 opposing votes (325 voted in favor).

One hundred years of history had not proven sufficient to overcome the restrictions in questions of baptism of those early days of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.⁴⁰

Without minimizing the effective witness of the Mennonite Brethren in the first 50 years of their history we need also to recognize the hindrances which their position of legalism in matters of baptism and spiritual fellowship created. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite Churches in 1905 also known as the Alliance churches in the beginning of the 20th century, testifies to this fact.

The Alliance fellowship in the Molotschna consisted of believers which came from both the Mennonite Church as well as from the Mennonite Brethren. The statement of faith and practice was identical of that of the Mennonite Brethren with the exception that they accepted into their fellowship true born-again believers irrespective of the mode by which they were baptized. As a practice of baptism in their fellowship they adhered to immersion the same as the Mennonite Brethren.⁴¹

The Altonau Evangelical Mennonite Church at Sagradovka established in December of 1907 was another formal withdrawal from the Mennonite Church--a repetition of 1860--occasioned by the identical concern about the condition within the church. The historic significance of their action warrants that we quote part of their statement of secession:

Franz Martens, elder of this fellowship, writes the following concerning its origin: "Already for some years the majority of the ministers of the Nikolaifeld Mennonite Church of Sagradovka shared the understanding and conviction that our Mennonite churches had, in many points, departed from our confession of faith and especially from God's word, and that there was a need for serious thorough reform in respect to administration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and evangelical church discipline. Those ministers who longed for a spiritual life in the church had for many years already pointed to the abuses and had pressed the teachings and confessions handed down to us from our forefathers. . . . Is this not the main reason why in the last forty years of those who have been awakened to a new life have left the Mennonite churches? Does not the Mennonite Brethren Church in its confession 1900-1902 stress: "that their organization does not annul the confession of faith of other Anabaptist Mennonites in Russia, but that they protest against the church practices of these churches?"⁴²

All preaching and writing against separation remain fruitless since the Bible under certain circumstances commands separation (II Cor. 6:14ff). Elder Martens continues as a word to the mother church:

The fault that our congregations have reached their present condition does not lie only in the present generation: however, it is everyone's duty, and especially that of the elders, to discern and obey what the Lord says to the churches. From my point of view it was both timely and appropriate that our brother challenged all spiritual leaders in the Mennonite churches in 1905 at the General Conference at Memrik with a sermon that reviewed Christ's message to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6) to consider the question: "What must happen in order to bring about changes in the churches?" Our determined decision is to defend the practice of believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper for believers, and an apostolic church discipline taught by the scriptures and Menno Simons and as stressed in our own confession of faith. At the same time it is our heart's desire and prayer to God that he would give us grace in order that those who differ from us on this matter would not be grieved by our decision and action. However in order to be able to cultivate an unhindered fellowship with all those who are in agreement with us without being put into a position of having to violate the old congregational rules we have come to the conclusion that, should the Lord lead us to unite into one fellowship, we would not neglect to notify the church and the respective local officials about our decision.⁴³

On May the 15th, 1907, the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Altonau was formally established under the leadership of Elder Franz Martens. In 1908 one out of every five church members of the Mennonites in Russia was a Mennonite Brethren (7,000). The adherents however, numbered between 16,000 and 17,000.⁴⁴ The demand for rebaptism to transfer from the Mennonite Church to the Mennonite Brethren has prevented many people of those days dissatisfied with the Mennonite Church to identify formally with the Mennonite Brethren. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite Churches was the answer to the need not being met by the Mennonite Brethren.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in Context

of the Broader Mennonite Community

P. M. Friesen, as stated earlier, views the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church in a broader context of history. "Both are really inseparable parts of one collective organism."⁴⁵ His personal evaluation of the 1860 event in this

perspective cannot be omitted in the attempt for Mennonite Brethren self-understanding. He evaluates the origin of the M.B. in relation to the Mennonites in Russia at large in the following paragraph which I quote in full:

2. The author wishes at the outset to present his judgment with regard to the origin of the M.B. Church reached on the basis of the material, personal recollections and diligent inquiry from the "older generation." a) The organization of a separate "M.B. Church," in the midst of the "South Russian Mennonite Brotherhood," based on the Scriptures and the most essential ideas of Menno, given the secularized state of the largest part of the Russian Mennonites and the inability and partial reluctance of the church councils generally to oppose the corruption, was necessary and proved to be salutary for all of the Russian Mennonites. Generally speaking, however, the founders of the M.B. Church were neither intellectually nor spiritually well-enough prepared for the task: several of the co-founders were decidedly incompetent and were exposed by the subsequent events graciously directed by God; many were finally expelled from the group by the wholesome element; others left of their own accord; still others repented of their mistakes and sins, in the same way in which the whole M.B. Church now and then has openly confessed and condemned its errors (cf. Confession of Faith, 1900/1902, "Explanation"),--remaining in the church with modest positions brought on by the errors they had committed. But even some of the better elements, through the fault of individuals who sinned, lost faith in the goodness of the cause and could not again, whether through their own fault or that of the church, be reconciled to it. But to the upright and those who humbled themselves a merciful God granted much grace that through them, as through "broken rods," a situation has arisen where we today have the honor and the duty to co-operate in the work that benefits the entire Mennonite confessional fellowship in Russia and America, and to participate in building God's kingdom generally. But all of those amongst us who sense our inadequacy (it is to be hoped that the great majority of the M.B. Church belongs to this group), say with heartfelt sincerity: Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name be glory!⁴⁶

In the summaries of his historical observations Friesen quotes a leading brother, a very respected personality in both church groups who had as a mature person and a serious Christian left the Mennonite Church and gone over to the Mennonite Brethren Church at that time, some 25 years ago. His testimony is as follows:

While he was fully convinced of the necessity for the establishment of the M.B. Church and while his joining with it was an act of obedience in agreement with his clear personal understanding taken for his own spiritual safety and growth, he nevertheless found that the spiritual life among our Russian Mennonites developed differently than he had at first envisioned. The spiritual growth and improvement, as far as he knows it, is relatively stronger in the Mennonite Church than in the Mennonite Brethren Church with all its advantages.⁴⁷

The years between 1860 to 1910 had resulted in a broad spiritual awakening within the Mennonite Church. The majority of the ministers of the church had come to a positive evangelical faith and churches consisting mainly of unbelievers would "call mainly dedicated Christians into the ministry." If someone was called who was not a true believer he would become a Christian out of fear in view of the holy responsibility he was to assume.⁴⁸

The renewal of the New Testament emphasis on the personal experience of salvation of the "New Birth," a responsible consistent testimony of life, a fellowship concept of the church and a responsibility for the missionary assignment of evangelism, had permeated the larger Mennonite community in a gradual process of renewal. The above observation found strong confirmation in an address of the widely-known historian, Harold Bender, on the occasion of the M.B. Centennial observance in Winnipeg. He maintained that the spiritual revivals through the pietistic influence in the context of the Mennonite Brethren needed to be recognized as a major influence that turned the tide of Mennonitism in Russia and North America from that of an ethnic cultural or religious institutionalism to the major emphasis in message and character of the early Anabaptists of the 16th century.⁴⁹

The expansion of the Mennonite Brethren between 1860 to 1910 in Russia and the growth of the fellowship in North America (1874-1924) before the large influx of Mennonites from Russia (1924-1930) confirms their evangelical influence in the context of the broader Mennonite community. The zeal for evangelism and missions beyond the frontiers of their ethnically related communities became an example for other Mennonite groups to which they responded as new life came to them through spiritual renewal. Friesen describes the M.B. Church as undisputedly one of the progressive churches which gave strong expression to their inner experiences. He points to many of their members who became prominent as spiritual and intellectual leaders in the Mennonite society.⁵⁰

In contrast to the broad spiritual contributions by the Mennonite Brethren, Friesen laments that the "growth in grace has been relatively slower in the M.B. Church than in the older Mennonite groups."⁵¹ He believes that the main error of the M.B. Church "in relation to the grace received is a lack of humility and unsparring self-judgement, as well as a certain reluctance to acknowledge the good aspects, both old and new, in the Mennonite Churches."⁵² He further laments that church discipline and the walk of many members of the M.B. fellowship do not correspond with the ideal they set forth in their Letter of Secession.⁵³

The strength and weakness of the M.B. fellowship described by Friesen after the first 50 years of its history finds strong similarity with the statement of self-evaluation written by the late B. B. Janz in a document: *Grundzüge im Character der Glaubensstellung unserer Vaeter*-- read in Winnipeg, Manitoba on the occasion of a study conference in 1956.⁵⁴

Weaknesses which have hindered the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren within the broader community in his judgement, was their legalism, their insistence to make immersion baptism the "hailmark" of truth, "Schlagbaumgegen andere Glaubige" and their strong insistence that their understanding of the Scriptures was final truth. They had not learned, he says, to say, this is how I understand it was written and to recognize that the understanding of others may also be valid. These traits gave the Mennonite Brethren the character of a "narrow brother."⁵⁵

With humility we must recognize the grace, mercy and longsuffering of God as we view ourselves in the context of History interpreted by one of our early forefathers, P. M. Friesen.

Observations

The investment of a large part of my time and energy of the past three years to guide the process of the translation and publication of the P. M. Friesen work has created some areas of tensions within me. As I view our present in the light of the past, I must address myself to some basic issues which provided the foundation stones in the birth and life of the early M. B. Church. Permit me to release some of these tensions by sharing a few observations which have emerged in this process.

1. The struggle for preservation of our ecclesiastical and educational institutions has a blinding effect upon the understanding of character and purpose of a spiritual calling and mission. Anabaptism was born in a struggle to regain the freedom to experience the marvels of redemptive grace in personal relation to Christ as Saviour and Lord. It was the cry to return to the Bible as the authority for faith and life in a liberation from the bondage of sin, regain the joy of salvation and be freed from a politically-dominated structure of the Roman Institution. In the history of the Mennonite Movement there is a record of such struggle between 1525 and 1860. (Holland, Prussia). Our focus however is the question of our self-understanding as an M. B. Fellowship in the "Now".

The struggle for the preservation of our institutions which may have lost their original character and mission that gave birth to them, can pretend a holy zeal for a great and righteous cause not recognizing the carnal pursuits for self-preservation. Institutions developed to serve a spiritual vision may claim to be the continued stewards of such a vision, to use the claim to justify their existence while operating contrary to the very essence of its original purpose. Political manipulation, formation of power blocks, provincialism to retain advantages of existing institutions and positions are the symptoms of the destructive disease of a once spiritual fellowship. To what degree do the present struggles for local churches and educational institutions within the M. B. Conference indicate the presence of such processes of spiritual decline?

2. The basic issues in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren movement were a redemptive faith--a New Birth, a transformed walk for a true believer in contrast to a form either prescribed or generally practiced in a social order without the evidences of a new life. The Mennonite Brethren in Russia distinguished between genuine conversion--evidenced by a sanctified life at great cost--and religious profession in accommodation to the culture and political advantages of their social and economic existence. Discipleship by our early Brethren in the 19th Century meant radical tension with the culture of their day at great economic and social sacrifices. Have the Mennonite Brethren in America found a way to cope with the secular culture in an affluent society without radical tension? Have they found a gospel which serves as a benefit in assuring a good life? Do we hope for heaven in the beyond while practicing full identification with the culture now? We opt for a gospel of great benefit for "nothing" which brings peace of mind without calling us to be a peculiar people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation to show forth the virtues of him who has called them out of darkness into a new life.

3. Discipline for the early M. B. Church was the expression of spiritual interresponsibility. The question of "Nachfolge", as understood by Hans Denk, was a corporate responsibility to guard the testimony of the Christ whose name they bore??

Concern for the testimony of the church in some localities became legalism applying more to selected standards of social ethics to punish those who would violate adopted patterns of behaviour.

The negative effects of "punishment" in place of "redemptive discipline" became an irritation. An American culture of individualism provides a faith which claims the redemptive benefits of personal salvation without a responsibility for a consistent walk towards a corporate body of a church. The Mennonite Brethren fellowship of today does believe in individual responsibility without a corporate inter-responsibility for life and walk. Another foundation stone of the 19th Century

Mennonite Brethren Church seems to falter.

P. M. Friesen describes vividly the tensions which beset our early Brethren in questions of baptism and fellowship with believers—who in understanding of forms and practices differed from them. He speaks of the "all too strict ones"—isolationists—in tension with the "liberal ones" who were open to love and recognize their need for fellowship of those who may differ with them in "Erkenntniss" (Understanding). "We cannot understand how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's Word, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters. This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and therefore coerce him." Does P. M. Friesen speak here only to the Brotherhood of the 1860-1910, or does he speak also to the tensions in the Mennonite Brethren Fellowship related to the present dialogue on inspiration and eschatology? Does history in its evidences of consequence have something to say to the Brotherhood today?

The call of P. M. Friesen for humility and repentance to the people in 1910 offers a very important point of reference for our self-understanding and possible reorientation in 1978.

David Wiersma, in his book, *The Mennonite Brethren Conflict*, writes:

The rigid authoritarianism of Elders—involved in the conflict with founding brethren

- ① Identity — real cause for secession?
- ② History — what sort of history is P.M. Friesen's work?
- ③ Why was the history written in first place?

FOOTNOTES

¹ Paul Toews, Editor, Pilgrims and Strangers-Essays in Mennonite Brethren History, Center for M. B. Studies, Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

² F. C. Peters, "Quo Vadis M. B. Church," Christian Leader, Sept. 9, 1969; Peter Klassen, "Mennonite Brethren: Baptists or Mennonites," unpublished manuscript, Mennonite Graduate Fellowship, 1964; Waldo Hiebert, "Who are the Mennonite Brethren?," Christian Leader, Sept. 13, 1966; J. A. Toews, "In Search for Identity," M. B. Herald, March 10, 1972; Elmer and Phyllis Martens, "Mennonite Brethren: Does the Name Fit," Christian Leader, August 10, 1971; above only a few of many.

³ Royal Bank of Canada, Monthly Letters Vol. 58, #3, March, 1977.

⁴ P. M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), English translation published by Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Fresno, California, 1978, Author's Preface, pp. XXVII-XXXIII.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 201-574.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 1-3, Additional reference chapters I-V.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 230-232.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 15-18.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 230-262.

¹⁰ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, pp. 92-109.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 93-95.

¹² Ibid, pp. 92-108.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, p. 232.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 241-253.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 233-253.

¹⁸ A. H. Unruh, Geschichte der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde, Christian Press, 1954, pp. 286-308.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 248-250.

²⁰ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, pp. 230-232.

²¹ Ibid, p. 16.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 261.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 231.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 244-246; Jacob P. Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, published by Mennonite Brethren Historical Society, Hillsboro, Kansas, pp. 96ff.

²⁷ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, p. 231.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 252.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 241.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 384-387.

³¹ Ibid, p. 347.

³² Ibid, pp. 416-441.

³³ Ibid, pp. 284-311.

³⁴ Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 138-182.

³⁵ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, pp. 290-291.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 302-303.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 303-305.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 456.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 457.

⁴⁰ Conference Book, 1963.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 920-921.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 921-923.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 922-923.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 926.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 572.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 202.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 975.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 975-976.

⁴⁹ Harold S. Bender, Recorded Message,; F. C. Peters, Waterloo.

⁵⁰ Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, p. 977.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 977.

⁵² Ibid, p. 975.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ B. B. Janz, Study Conference paper, Winnipeg, 1956, Copy in Center for M. B. Studies, Fresno.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

